

GRAVEN IMAGES

Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels

Comic books have increasingly become a vehicle for serious social commentary and, specifically, for innovative religious thought. Practitioners of both traditional religions and new religious movements have begun to employ comics as a missionary tool, while humanists and religious progressives use comics' unique fusion of text and image to criticize traditional theologies and to offer alternatives. Addressing both the increasing fervor with which the public has come to view comics as an art form and Americans' fraught but passionate relationship with religion, *Graven Images* provides an opportunity for discussion of cutting-edge artistic and social issues by exploring the roles of religion in comic books and graphic novels.

In essays by scholars and comics creators, *Graven Images* observes the frequency with which religious material—in devout, educational, satirical, or critical contexts—occurs in both independent and mainstream comics. Contributors identify the unique advantages of the comics medium for religious messages; analyze how comics communicate such messages; place the religious messages contained in comic books in appropriate cultural, social, and historical frameworks; and articulate the significance of the innovative theologies being developed in comics.

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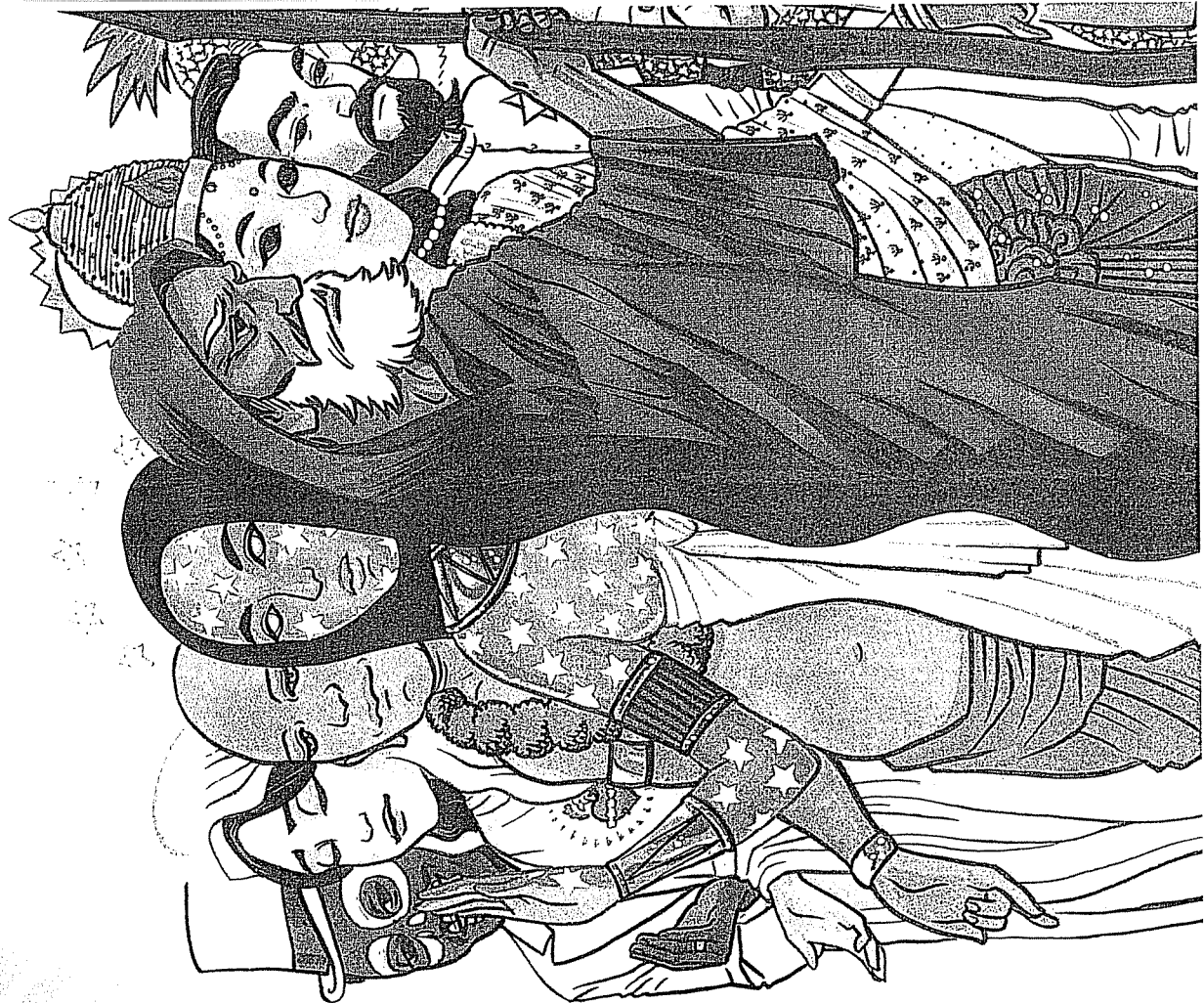


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expectations. Rather than using a grandiose narrative of belief and allegory (of the type more usually associated with religious texts), *Chosen's* narrative style is established as teenage from the very first scene, in which Jodie and his friends are searching for a torn-up "stroke mag."⁹³ Throughout the comic, Jodie's reactions to the religious events taking over his life are couched exclusively in teenage terms: typically, one of the first miracles he attempts is turning water into wine. ("By the time we got home, of course, the story was that I'd also multiplied the loaves and conjured up a thousand little Snickers bars.")⁹⁴ Similarly, his response to religious adulation is a typically understated: "All the *bowing* and stuff's pretty damn cool."⁹⁵ The teenage motivation extends to the widest level of the text, whose events are redefined in contemporary terms: "Okay, you got to think of the Old Testament as *Star Wars*," continuing, "Everybody likes it, the characters were great, and its huge success was always gonna change the world forever."⁹⁶ Jodie draws similar parallels between the New Testament and *The Empire Strikes Back* and between his own life and *Return of the Jedi*, again with reference to their popularity and fandom.

This redefinition doesn't just rely on the use of teenage language and movie genres but is also closely focused on the superheroic. When he starts to realize his new powers, Jodie initially concludes that he must be "a friggin' mutant" rather than a deity, commenting, "Obviously I'd been reading my *X-Men* with a little more fervor than I'd been reading the *good book*."⁹⁷ His perceptions of taking on his role are also heavily colored by superhero myths. When he learns he must leave his hometown of Peoria, he states: "[T]hey want me to go live in New York for a while and then they're gonna send me 'round the world to learn philosophy and karate and all *that* kinda shit, I guess."⁹⁸ Here, the mysterious training in the Far East directly references *Batman*. This characterisation of religion as superheroic is key to the text and is also present in Simon Pegg's introduction, which likens Advent, the birth of Jesus, to the superhero origin story. He says that Advent is the most memorable part of this "famous hero legend," just as Spider-Man's bite or the murder of Batman's parents are the best-known parts of their respective stories.

In addition to these overt references to superheroics, the overall structure of *Chosen* supports a reading of the comic as superhero narrative. For example, the parallels that are drawn between Jodie and Jesus recall a common strategy in comics: the mirroring of hero and villain. The similarities between hero and villain have been explored

"The Apocalypse of Adolescence": Use of the *Bildungsroman* and Superheroic Tropes in Mark Millar and Peter Gross's

Chosen

JULIA ROUND

DOGS WORK IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS,¹ and *Chosen* (Dark Horse, 2004) is a comic as strange and inverted as this quotation implies. This twist story about Satan and the end of the world leads the reader to believe that the 12-year-old protagonist, Jodie Christianson, is the reincarnated Jesus Christ. However, tricks throughout the narrative build to a surprise ending that reveals that Jodie is, in fact, the son of Satan and will be leading this side in Armageddon. To tell this story, *Chosen* uses traditional narrative and superheroic conventions to re-present religious dogma as subjective rather than objective and leverages a variety of paradoxical and contrasting methods.

Writer Mark Millar said his Scottish Catholic upbringing meant he "wanted to do a book about faith that *wasn't* about child-molesting priests or all the usual shit you get when we liberals write stories about the Church. I wanted to write something about the Church without taking the piss out of it, and write something about Jesus that wasn't judgmental or mocking."² Instead, *Chosen* offers a postmodern religious allegory that acknowledges its contradictions and plays on audience

many other times in comics history: for example, Doctor Doom was introduced to the *Fantastic Four* comics in a story voiced by superteam leader Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) as a rival scientist whose genius matched his own.¹⁰ They have also been referenced in comics such as *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, both metaphorically, as in the opening line, "There were these two guys in a lunatic asylum,"¹¹ and explicitly, as when the Joker states the similarities between himself and Batman: "All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. [...] You had a bad day once, am I right?" and "[S]omething like that, I bet. Something like that . . . something like that happened to me, you know."¹² The Joker's argument here is that both he and Batman have been reduced to criminal activities by traumas in their lives (i.e., the death of the Joker's wife and the death of Batman's parents). The parallel between hero and villain has also been noted by comics creator Frank Miller, who states that "the Batman folklore is full of Doppelgängers for Batman. The Joker is one of them [...]. Two-Face is identical to Batman."¹³ As such, in the superhero world, multiple similarities can be drawn between the allegedly opposing forces of hero and villain. This strategy is used to create the misleading narrative of *Chosen*, and Jodie even concludes in the penultimate panel that he has "a lot more in common than most people would imagine"¹⁴ with Jesus.

As well as relying on teenage tropes and superheroic references, *Chosen* can also be defined as a *Bildungsroman* tale. This term, which in German means "novel of education," was coined by Johann Morgenstern in the early 1820s. It is generally used to describe a story that tells of the maturation and moral, social, or psychological development of a young protagonist. Although it traditionally refers to a historically limited genre of German literature, the story structure can, of course, appear within other texts outside that time period.

Traditionally, theorists such as Roy Pascal have defined the genre by its themes and content, focusing on the hero's naiveté, his development through mistakes, and the good guidance he receives from his companions.¹⁵ However, this thematic definition has recently given way to new interpretation and current criticism that instead considers the *Bildungsroman*'s structural and narrative features. In so doing, it defines the plot events in terms of self-understanding rather than personal growth; emphasizes the dual position of the protagonist (as both reflective narrator and developing subject); and notes a circular (rather than linear) narrative structure. These later critics also agree that the genre

model can also be applied to more recent works and can be used as a "heuristic tool" to compare texts.¹⁶

Critics such as Martin Swales comment that "the problem of *Bildung*, of personal growth, is enacted in the narrator's discursive self-understanding rather than in the events which the hero experiences."¹⁷ Therefore, even a story such as *Chosen* can still qualify as a *Bildungsroman* since Jodie's arrival at self-understanding is the significant factor rather than the expected happy ending. Swales continues, "Even the nonfulfillment of consistently intimated expectation can, paradoxically, represent a validation of the genre by means of its controlled critique."¹⁸ In this light, *Chosen*'s twist ending (which contradicts the "consistently intimated expectation" that Jodie is Christ) also evidences the *Bildungsroman* as it critiques our one-sided assumptions about the story. Swales concludes that the *Bildungsroman* "is written for the sake of the journey, and not for the sake of the happy ending toward which that journey points."¹⁹ So, although it might seem that the nature of Jodie's story (as a moral descent rather than a moral maturation) means it cannot be a *Bildungsroman*, using this aesthetic definition of the term means it can nonetheless be viewed as one.

Michael Beddow also rejects thematic definitions of the *Bildungsroman*, instead arguing that the genre's ultimate aim is to use the hero's *fictional* experiences to provide insights into human nature that could not be adequately conveyed by argument or non-fiction.²⁰ This perspective is echoed by Michael Minden, who focuses his study upon the dual subject position of the protagonist (as both narrator and subject) that underpins such a narrative, saying, "It is precisely this *double* determination that is reflected in the *Bildungsroman*: the (secret) alliance between an assured narrative voice, equipped with general maxims [...] and the 'poor dog' of an empirical subject who has to make his way amid the vicissitudes of concrete circumstances."²¹ In so doing, Minden distinguishes between *Bildungsroman* and autobiography, explaining how the gap between naïve subject and knowing narrator makes the tale universal by "disowning" personal experience.²²

This process is also apparent in *Chosen*. The text uses the first-person retrospective narration of the 33-year-old Jodie telling his story; rather than simply recounting what happened, however, comments and scenes relating to this present time are intercut throughout. For example, the adult Jodie's comment — "It's really quite *charming* in retrospect"²³ — evaluates the whole tale from his knowing perspective. His narrative

also contains direct address to the reader, from the opening line: "Close your eyes. [. . .] Can you remember what it was like to be twelve years old again?"²⁴ Through the paradoxical linguistic structure of sentences like these (which combine words like "remember" and "again"), the narrative is suspended beyond time, set in a moment of reflection on all our childhoods. Here we can see both the "universalizing" process that Beddow identifies and also the dual temporal position (of narrator versus subject) noted by Minden.

This duality is continued throughout *Chosen*, and, in fact, the comic is able to emphasize this contradiction even further by presenting both voices (of the child and adult Jodie) in dialogue as well as in narration rather than making the adult voice the only narrator. Childhood and adulthood are thereby compared throughout, for example in comments such as "We're all the heroes in our own life's stories, you see. It doesn't matter if you're *twelve years old* or a *hundred* and twelve."²⁵ Similarly, the penultimate panel, which reveals the adult Jodie to be the President of the United States (an adult position of great responsibility), also simultaneously positions him as a child through the dialogue, in which he defines himself and Jesus as "two boys with overbearing fathers."²⁶ In this way, *Chosen*'s narrative proceeds from a paradoxical position that uses the contradictions of the *Bildungsroman* (a story that is simultaneously about both child and adult) to indicate that its religious content will also run contrary to our expectations.

A *Bildungsroman* aesthetic can be seen in *Chosen*'s use of a dual subject position, its circular narrative structure, and the arrival at "self-understanding" apparent in the ending. As such, the twist ending is also key to the narrative structure of this comic. Jodie is an unreliable narrator who deliberately manipulates his story, as is shown through his knowing comments and retrospective evaluation of events. This technique has a precedent in both prose (such as Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) and visual culture (films such as Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects*).

As a literary tradition, the "twist" ending takes various forms (including *peripeteia* and *agnarosis*, defined below) and can be traced back to classic literature such as the story of Oedipus.²⁷ This story (along with *Chosen*) uses *agnarosis* (discovery), best defined as a character's sudden recognition of their own or another's true identity/nature. Jodie's discovery of his real identity and destiny certainly falls into this category, but the text also relies on other forms of the twist ending to maximize

its shock impact. *Chosen*'s narrative twist can also be defined as an example of *peripeteia*, the sudden reversal of the protagonist's fortune that emerges naturally from the character's circumstances. For this tactic to succeed, it must be logical within the timeframe of the story (otherwise it, instead, becomes an example of *deus ex machina*: "the god from the machine," when an unexpected or previously unindicated event is used to resolve the narrative). *Chosen* takes great pains to enforce the use of *peripeteia* over *deus ex machina* by carefully including clues about Jodie's real nature alongside "evidence" of his divinity.

Throughout the comic, we are led to believe that Jodie Christianson is the reincarnated Jesus Christ through devices such as his name, initials, and even the cover of the book, which depicts him crucified on a telegraph pole. His parents' sexless marriage and his group of "teenage apostles" (including Maggie representing Mary Magdalene) also support this interpretation.²⁸ However, as Millar and Gross point out in an interview included in the book, clues to Jodie's real identity are also scattered throughout the comic. He is addressed as "little prince" by the nurse Lilly (Lillith) and pictured with a horned shadow on the same page.²⁹ Later in the text, Jodie's shadow appears reversed,³⁰ and a blackboard shows the partially obscured Latin text ". . . sunt quae videtur,"³¹ meaning "things are not what they seem." At a wider level, the *Star Wars* analogy (where the villain Darth Vader is revealed to be Luke's father) gives another clue to the reality of Jodie's parentage.

The serialized nature of the comics medium reinforces this narrative construction as mini-cliffhangers are positioned at the end of issues. For example, Jodie first arrives at the idea that he is the son of God on the final page of *Chosen* #1, after reading Revelation, and the final page of *Chosen* #2 introduces the potential for Armageddon.³² Tension points are also frequently placed in the final panels of pages. For example, the very last panel on page 64 reveals that Jodie is about to meet "your father." We, the readers, are forced to pause to turn this page before the climax is revealed by Lilly during the next page, concluding with, "Why, *Satan*, of course. We're going to meet *Satan*" (see Figure 1).³³

The repetition, stress, and curt phrasing all combine to emphasize the impact of this sentence, as do the visual elements of these panels, whose initial close-up shots of Jodie's and Lilly's eyes ensure our attention is focused on the words of this important conversation. The final panel perhaps also visually conveys Jodie's "fall" as their car speeds away from the readers' perspective, partially obscured already as it descends

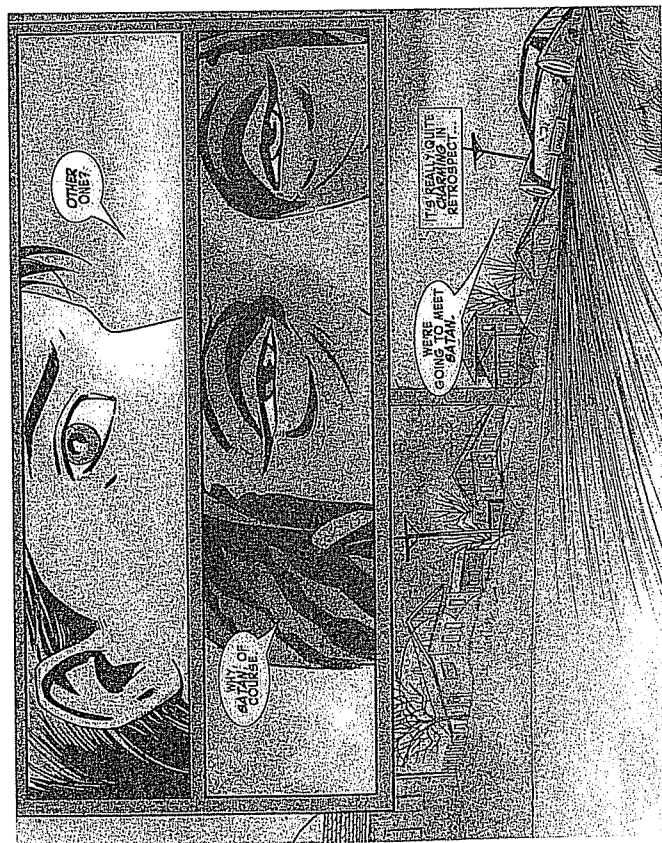


Figure 1. Millar and Gross, *Chosen*, 65. Lilly reveals the truth about Jodie's parentage.

over the brow of a hill. Peter Gross's composition puts the car exhaust fumes in the foreground of this panel, perhaps representing the clouds of a heaven. Jodie is leaving behind, while Jeanne McGee's coloring paints the horizon he is speeding towards an ominous red that might be either a sunset or metaphor for Hell.

The denouement on the following page, set in the present (where the adult Jodie is telling his story), provides the perfect counterpoint to this revelation. The subdued coloring contrasts with the pastel tones used on the previous (facing) page, again emphasizing the difference between Jodie's past innocence and his present position. However, this scene, too, contains further twists, including the surprise that Jodie is the President of the United States. It also relies on similar shock tactics to those noted on the previous page, as in Jodie's blunt and ironic summary of his first meeting with his father (see Figure 2).

The visual content of this panel is surprisingly blank, showing only the shadowed face of our narrator in mid-shot and ensuring that our attention is focused on the words (again, a similar strategy to that noted

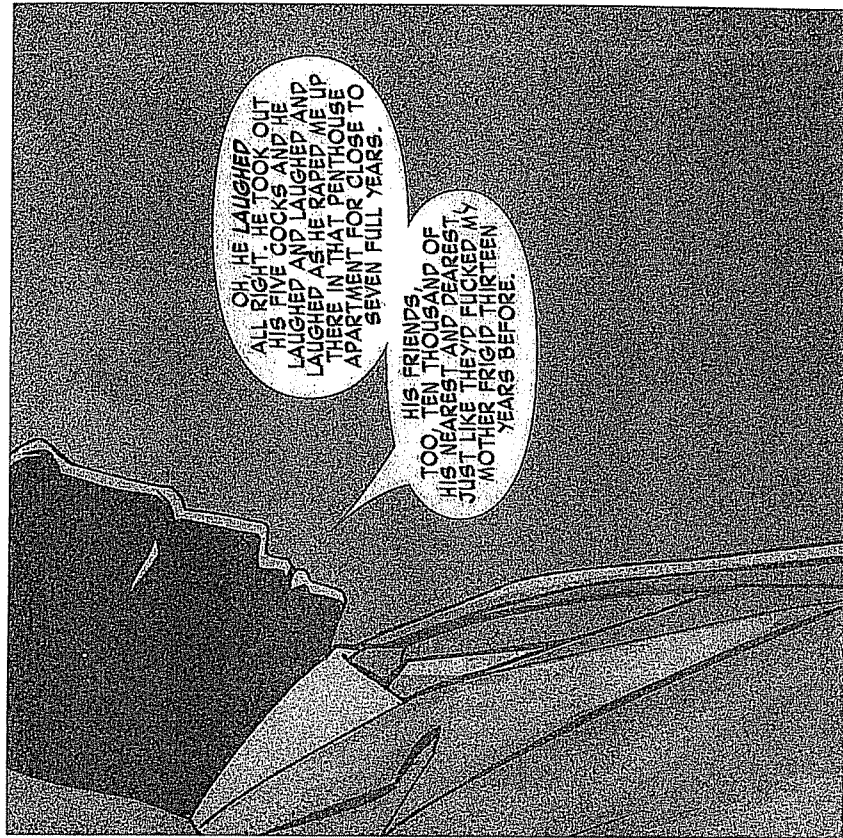


Figure 2. Millar and Gross, *Chosen*, 66. Jodie reflects on his first meeting with his father.

previously). All the impact comes from the language: the repetition ("laughed and laughed and laughed") and sarcasm ("ten thousand of his nearest and dearest") combine with excess to give this statement its shock value. Rather than using visual emphasis or even emotive language, the long sentence conveys its horror in a factual and additive manner. It begins by establishing the rape simply and bluntly ("he raped me") and then stating that this lasted for "close to seven full years," with multiple assailants ("his friends too"), all prefigured by his mother's similar abuse ("just like they'd fucked my mother frigid"), before finally concluding by reminding us that Jodie was just twelve at this time ("thirteen years before").

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Minden says that incest

and inheritance are used in *Bildungsroman* as thematic motifs to express development. He defines incest, not simply literally, but as "a motif expressing the quintessence of desire, with its logical end in the collapse of all differences"³⁴ and notes that these two motifs (of incest and inheritance)

also have their expression on the level of narrative technique. The *Bildungsroman*, as we have said, relies upon the co-operation of these two principles. The hero, hesitant about his creativity, relies upon the confident offices of one in no such doubt: the narrator. To that extent, this is the configuration of autobiography, in which a mature and accomplished voice recounts the vicissitudes of the less complete person he once was.³⁵

We can certainly see this technique being used in the narrator's description of his meeting with his father, as the adult Jodie's bitterness and blunt truths are juxtaposed with the naïveté and dreams of the child Jodie. Motifs of incest and inheritance combine to give the relationship between the adult and child protagonist the sense of inevitability that Minden also identifies as key to the *Bildungsroman*. After all, Jodie has always been Satan's son (despite being unaware of it), and in this sense, *Chosen's* narrative is not linear but circular, as Jodie's journey of discovery leads him "home."³⁶

As such, we can see that *Chosen* uses superheroic tropes and a *Bildungsroman* aesthetic to present its religious content by juxtaposing revelatory narrative content with traditional religious language and events. For example, much of Millar's phrasing is intentionally evocative of the biblical: Jodie's initial survival of the accident with Jess Caldwell's truck is described as a "*miracle*"³⁷ by Father Tom O'Higgins, and subsequent scenes are linked obviously with their biblical equivalents. The scene where Jodie answers questions in the school staff room is followed directly by his mother's summary of the story of Jesus in the temple, which she concludes by stating that watching him in the staff room "was my temple moment, Jodie."³⁸ In this way, the two scenes are overtly linked.

Similarly, Jodie's resurrection of Angel the dog openly references the Lazarus miracle, as Jodie's narration cynically notes:

Why I put so much time and effort into this one, insignificant dog

is something that I still can't figure out. Was I just trying to make a believer of doubting Tom O'Higgins? Or was I just keen to top the Lazarus trick with *shoubiz pyrotechnics*?³⁹

Both of these scenes are not only explicitly tied to their biblical counterparts but also defined as moments of evidence. As Jodie's mother explains, "Up until that point [seeing Jesus in the temple] they just couldn't be *certain*."⁴⁰ Similarly, Jodie's summary of the Lazarus scene defines its purpose as convincing the faithless. These events are also noted in Simon Pegg's introduction as "occurrences that convince even the town's most faithless that this boy is destined for greatness in the biblical sense."⁴¹

Presenting these events in this way enables Millar to explore and reflect upon the notion of faith. As Jodie's unreliable narration informs readers, "Ironically, it was only the *non-believers* who still huddled in their pews and prayed to God via their balding, cheese-breathed *middleman*," while, outside the church, Christianity was "happy and thriving."⁴² However, deconstructing this scenario instantly shows that describing those in church as "non-believers" is dubious — since, for those outside the church, faith has become fact. This is reinforced at many points in the text. For example, the cancer-ridden Mrs. Freemont's fears of dying vanish once she is assured of Jodie's divinity; as she says, "that was before I knew he [God] was *real*."⁴³ The text's narration does the same thing, for example, as Jodie states, "My existence meant that God was as real as McDonald's and Burger King."⁴⁴ The nature of these similes, while typically consumerist, also suggests that faith become fact is cheapened (due to the fast food industry's quick-fix nature and sacrifice of quality in favor of convenience and cheapness).

The one person who remains unconvinced of Jodie's divinity is Father Tom O'Higgins. He explains this in conversation with Jodie's teacher Ben Freemont, in response to Ben's question:

"You're starting to *believe* in him, aren't you?"

"Actually, I'm not. I've never been more sure this kid is a *fake*. Trouble is — I look around and I see Mona McKenzie standing up without her crutches and Jess Caldwell learning to drive again and a little part of me really starts to wonder, Benny."

"About what?"

"Whether I'm the goddamn problem here. [...] Maybe the reason I can't see what everyone else sees in this kid is because my *faith* is gone."⁴⁵

On the surface, it is therefore easy for readers to believe in Jodie and dismiss Father O'Higgins's doubts as those of a faithless priest. But Millar takes pains to emphasize that the priest's dislike of Jodie is innate: "There was just something about this bratty little would-be Christ that happened to make his *skin crawl*."⁴⁶ This allows Millar to reverse faith and fact: Jodie's existence "proves" the reality of God, whereas Father O'Higgins's dislike of Jodie goes against the physical facts (such as the miracles he has performed) and in this sense is based solely on belief. In this way, Millar reverses the traditional positions of religious conviction and physical fact to question the idea that faith can be proved.

This reversal plays expertly with the tenets of comics narratology. The narrative of comics relies on three main tenets: the depiction of time as space, the involvement of the reader (to decipher panel contents and fill in the "gutters"), and the creation and sustenance of the hyperreal. This is defined by Jean Baudrillard as the replacement of reality with simulation, as images, signs, and signals stand for events and objects.⁴⁷ Consider, for example, "reality" TV shows: not only do the viewers experience a narrativized and selective version of events, but these are filtered through the medium of television so what they actually receive is no more than a virtual representation. In comics, the hyperreal is most frequently achieved through the use of stylized art and through the mobility of visual and verbal perspectives that can be juxtaposed and contradictory.⁴⁸

Chosen exploits all of these tenets. The time-as-space narratology is undermined by a narrator whose evaluative comments are interjected into the story at various points and whose narrative opens with the contradictory request to "Close your eyes."⁴⁹ The narrator addresses the readers directly at many points throughout the text, and so he also controls our interpretation of the text's events. The unreliable narrator misdirects us towards signs that reinforce an interpretation of Jodie as divine, rather than satanic.

The role of the interpretive reader is also played with in other ways. Critics such as Mark Currie have addressed the question of view and

vision in postmodern narratives and commented on the "tension between seeing and writing [...] in contemporary narratology,"⁵⁰ since seeing overrules the authority of verbal narrative. Comics often exploit this tension for dramatic or humorous purposes, and *Chosen* is no exception. For example, in the opening scenario, Jodie's narration defines childhood security as "knowing Mom and Dad and God would always be there when you *needed* them," while simultaneously the reader is shown the truck that is about to fall on him.⁵¹ Forcing the reader to weigh the visual against the verbal thereby becomes another tool to emphasize the unreliable narration. This is further emphasized by the following double splash page, whose perspective places the reader directly behind Jodie, also about to be crushed by the truck.

In terms of artistry, *Chosen*'s artwork (drawn by Peter Gross) connotes the natural and realistic, while containing enough background detail to provide the visual clues discussed earlier. The watercoloring (by Jeanne McGee) also allows for similar clues. Jodie's childhood is predominantly painted in pastel colors, although some key scenes, such as his resurrection of Angel the dog, are colored an ominous red.⁵² (Gross's depiction of Jodie in this panel is equally demonic, as only the whites of his eyes are showing and his hair is raised to resemble horns.) The pastel watercolors that dominate the comic contrast with the scenes featuring the adult Jodie, which are painted in muted, darker tones. However, allowing the ethereal coloring to dominate also reinforces the narrative misdirection towards the pastoral, leading us to interpret the book as a simple parable. As Mark Millar puts it, the coloring gives the book "a quiet tone and a realistic atmosphere that made everything very fairytale, but also very natural [...]" there was a beautiful verisimilitude brought to Jodie's world.⁵³ This stands in contrast to the mass perception of comics artwork as brightly colored pop art. As such, *Chosen* offers a hyperrealist comics universe where seeing is quite literally believing, and the artistic style strives to create realism. This also informs the above discussion of visual versus verbal narrative, as the visual elements of the comic are given a realistic presentation in contrast to the unbelievable narrative content.

In this way, both the medium and content of *Chosen* align to subvert the traditional presentation of religious argument. This is supported by contradictions in the text such as the omniscient yet unreliable narrative voice, the inversion of religious faith and physical fact, and the juxtaposition of *Bildungsroman* and superheroic tropes with religious

content. These paradoxes are achieved by subverting comics narratology and indicated by both visual and verbal markers. For example, even the reversal (of god/dog) apparent in the sentence "dogs work in mysterious ways"⁷⁴ can be read as a hint that the story we are reading is inverted, both in terms of its creation (as Millar worked backwards from his twist ending) and subverted content.

Chosen has much in common with religious texts. Its content is faithful to that promised by Revelation, and its message is evangelical — not as a representation of the Christ tale but as a modern allegory that encourages individual thought and, in the final analysis, emphasizes the dominance of faith over certainty. Even the supporting appendices — not one, but two Afterwords (from Brother John Hanson and Brother Richard Hendrick, respectively) — can be seen as encouraging diversity and interpretation. It even extends its evangelical thread to comics: "Did you ever read any of that stuff? Frank Miller's *Daredevil*? Byrne's *Fantastic Four*? Chris Claremont's seminal and kinky run on *X-Men*? It's all so much better than you might expect."⁷⁵ In this sense, the narrative aligns religious and superheroic myth. As Mark Millar says, "[S]uperhero comics in particular are essentially just modern-day tellings of the same old myth stories, except God didn't wear Clark Kent's glasses as he moved among mortal men." Along similar lines, Peter Gross comments that biblical "stories are important but nobody really knows if they're real. [...] I can't help but wonder why it isn't enough for people to take their religion as powerful stories."⁷⁶

Chosen redefines religious content as subjective rather than objective by emphasizing the need for personal interpretation through misdirection and inversion. It aligns religious stories with tales of the superheroic in terms of structure and content, using various symbols and overt references. In so doing, it uses a *Bildungsroman* structure where Jodie arrives at moral maturity as he reaches his satanic destiny, and it presents this journey in non-Manichaeic terms. (Manichaeism, an antiquated religion that originated in Persia, focuses on the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light and an evil, material world of darkness. The term is most often used to describe a black-and-white/good-or-evil perception of morality or the world.) This step toward social commentary is also demonstrated by the final revelation that Jodie has become President of the United States, which can perhaps be read as a comment on global politics or the dangers of nuclear weaponry.⁷⁷

In *Chosen*, Mark Millar breaks down the clear-cut Manichaeic morality

that often underpins religious texts. He rejects absolutes and fixed morals by leading the reader to misinterpret events and presumed signs. By tricking us into having sympathy for the devil, the narrative's sudden ending forces us to question every step of what had seemed either an obvious parable or an expected church-bashing. Instead, *Chosen* reveals it has been telling us an entirely different story, one that calls attention to the assumptions and inconsistencies in our treatment of religious content. As social commentary, the comic reflects contemporary concerns about belief within today's culture of religious diversity, evangelical atheism,⁷⁸ and widespread agnosticism. By debunking our expectations, *Chosen*'s apocalyptic ending forces us to examine our assumptions and beliefs: putting faith into practice.

Notes

- 1 Mark Millar (w) and Peter Gross (a), *Chosen* (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse, 2005), 7.
- 2 Mark Millar and Peter Gross, "The Gospel According to Millar and Gross," *Chosen*, 68.
- 3 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 2.
- 4 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 30.
- 5 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 48.
- 6 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 31.
- 7 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 20.
- 8 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 57.
- 9 Simon Pegg, "Introduction," *Chosen*, npag.
- 10 Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a), *Fantastic Four* #5, 1962.
- 11 Alan Moore (w) and Brian Bolland (a), *The Killing Joke* (London: Titan Books, 1988), 3.
- 12 Moore, Bolland, *The Killing Joke*, 38–9.
- 13 Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, (eds.), *The Many Lives of the Batman* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 36.
- 14 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 66.
- 15 Roy Pascal, *The German Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), 60.
- 16 Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 161.
- 17 Swales, 4.
- 18 Swales, 12.
- 19 Swales, 34.
- 20 Michael Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 5.
- 21 Michael Minden, *The German Bildungsroman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7.
- 22 Minden, 5.
- 23 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 65. The "present day" is also represented on pages 20–1 and 66–7.
- 24 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 1.

- 25 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 66.
 26 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 66.
 27 It is interesting to note that Minden comments that "the successful negotiation of the Oedipal stage is nevertheless a sort of *Bildungsroman*" (13), proposing that, if the titular protagonist had been able to reconcile himself with the shock discovery of his true identity, the aesthetic structure of this text would fall into this category.
- 28 Millar, Gross, "The Gospel According to Millar and Gross," 68.
 29 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 10.
 30 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 34.
 31 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 13.
 32 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 22, 44.
 33 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 65.
 34 Minden, 1.
 35 Minden, 4.
 36 Minden, 1.
 37 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 8.
 38 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 17–19.
 39 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 62.
 40 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 19.
 41 Pegg, "Introduction."
 42 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 46.
 43 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 47.
 44 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 43.
 45 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 52–3.
 46 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 46.
 47 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994) for a full discussion.
 48 For further discussion of this point, see Julia Round, "Visual Perspective and Narrative Voice in Comics: Redefining Literary Terminology," *International Journal of Comic Art* 9:2 (Fall 2007), 316–29.
 49 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 1.
 50 Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1988), 127.
 51 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 4.
 52 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 61.
 53 Millar, Gross, "The Gospel According to Millar and Gross," 68.
 54 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 7.
 55 Millar, Gross, *Chosen*, 35.
 56 Millar, Gross, "The Gospel According to Millar and Gross," 74.
 57 My thanks to Craig Spence for this observation.
 58 For example, as evidenced by the publication of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. Dawkins also contributed towards an advertising campaign that ran in London, England during 2009, which placed advertising billboards on buses stating: "[T]here's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." The campaign sits alongside the advertisements of various Christian groups. Further details available at <http://richarddawkins.net>.

From God Nose to God's Bosom, Or How God (and Jack Jackson) Began Underground Comics

CLAY KINCHEN SMITH

GIVEN THEIR GRAPHIC DEPICTIONS OF sexuality, violence, and substance abuse, underground comics would seem to have little — if anything — in common with traditional Christian theology. More frequently, theology has served as one of the Establishment punching bags pummeled by undergrounds. Their reputation for being antagonistic to religion was earned with numerous derogatory portrayals of churches and religious people: everything from men voyeuristically peeping at nuns to *Tales from the Leather Nun*'s graphic explorations of sexuality.¹ On closer examination, however, underground comics share a deep and abiding relationship with Christian theology. In fact, undergrounds originated from a series of theological explorations in the early 1960s and returned to those origins when they self-resurrected in the latter half of the 1960s. As suggested here, the relationship between undergrounds and Christian theology is much more complex than it initially seems.

This relationship between undergrounds and Christianity began rather furtively with a shadowy group of alternative artists using a campus copier.² At the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1960s, a group known as the Texas Mafia — chief among whom were Jack Jackson, Gilbert Shelton, and Frank Stack — worked for the *Texas*